**Africa RISING, East and Southern Africa (AR ESA) Review: Ethiopia**

(Briefing note, 15 May 2015)

The project is now in its fourth year out of a scheduled five. It has made significant progress.

The project has benefitted from a flexible management approach assisted by good communications systems that have encouraged creativity and productive multi-institutional partnerships, as well as enabling it to respond to farmer demand. This management arrangement is appropriate to a participatory, process project dealing with complex farming systems in a heterogeneous environment. The project has a wide range of CGIAR and local partners who have combined well to conduct research protocols at four contrasting sites. Innovation platform have been established at woreda and kebele levels. These have facilitated the research work, provided forums for sharing and learning, and are potential platforms for the coordination of scaling up and out of findings. Both CGIAR and local partners highlighted the multi-institutional approach and the participatory nature of the project as being two of the most important contribution of the project.

A rather long situation analysis period in which a number of surveys gathered a large amount of qualitative and quantitative information resulted in some survey overload of farming communities. Despite the fact that some aspects of this component are still not documented, the project has moved into “integrated systems improvement” activities at the research sites. While the participatory action research has been successful in enthusing farmers and testing useful technologies, the majority of these activities have been focused on single disciplines (food crops, livestock nutrition, high value crops, soil fertility, post-harvest storage etc.), with few protocols looking at whole farm or landscape situations. Although protocols have included at least two CGIAR partners as well as local partners, it is the view of the Review Team that these multi-institutional partnerships have yet to start re-designing farming systems or bringing in radical departures from present practice or available knowledge. In commenting on the draft of this report, senior project staff felt that project efforts towards systems development had not been fully recognized and that:

* Some protocols explicitly look at outcomes across several system components and will be interpreted within a systems context;
* Assuming data handling can be unified successfully, then the household engagement patterns that the project has will allow it to explore complementarity amongst component interventions as well as trade-offs between them;
* Farmers are genuine partners in the research. They manage their farms as a whole, and are aware of the linkages between components relating to every management decision. They scrutinize everything the project does, so that a systems perspective is, to some extent, hard wired.

While the Review Team agrees with these statements, it maintains that there is opportunity (provided by the contrasting sites, the trust of the farmers and above all the presence of a multitude of local and international research organizations) to go further and explore ways to improve community nutrient flows, water-use efficiency and energy budgets, and moderate GHG emissions through technical and organizational innovation.

There are some shortcomings around the planning and operation of field research activities, but farmers are very appreciative of the way that research is followed up to ensure tangible benefits to those involved. The project is covering aspects of crops, livestock and trees, but there are key areas that it is not addressing fully at present, such as human nutrition, post-harvest aspects of the value chain, animal health and livestock breed improvement. The project might also look beyond farming and enquire about the aspirations and strategies of rural families for coping with multiple external and local influences and shocks (education, social status, economic strategies, risk management etc.).

The four research sites and their innovation platforms are excellent nuclei for scaling-out (spatially and to more people) and scaling-up (to more organizations) of successful innovations. This has already started on a small scale, both formally (e.g. through community-based seed production and government training) and informally though farmer-farmer exchange of information and materials. The project has a draft scaling plan, but this has a long way to go before it is a comprehensive scaling strategy, and research into scaling will need to move quickly to ensure it documents the multiple scaling processes (some already emerging) from their starting points.

The project has mainstreamed gender, but so far has not been able to influence the low number of women involved directly in the IPs and on-farm trials. A gender specialist has been appointed and appropriate steps (training, gender champions, studies and a gender action plan) are being taken to improve the involvement of women. This should be extended to youth, who are often landless and who might be lost to agriculture if explicit attention is not paid to their specific needs.

There is a good culture of sharing of information between researchers involved in the project. However, the data gathered by each research team is kept separately and in different formats. The plan to create a central data repository for all the data generated by the project is a good idea in principle. Researchers are unsure where the resources to make this a reality are coming from, but the potential benefits (e.g. meta-analysis of the data across systems) make it a worthwhile goal.

A comprehensive baseline snapshot has been captured by the different surveys conducted (including the IFPRI Baseline survey). Unfortunately these did not look at trends, which would also be useful for guiding the research program and providing more realistic scenarios for the project to be evaluated against at intervals. Monitoring of project progress has been hampered by three main factors. Firstly a confused picture (to the outsider at least) of what progress should be monitored against (outputs, outcomes, hypotheses, components or themes are all mentioned in various program and/or project documents, and there are no quantified or time-bound indicators against which to assess progress). The lack of sustainable intensification indicators is also a concern for this and other SI projects. Secondly, the lack of a project framework for AR Ethiopia (logframe-, Theory of Change- or Outcome-based) needs to be addressed. Thirdly, the unenthusiastic involvement of researchers in providing data for the web-tool that is supposed to monitor project progress (the Project Mapping and Monitoring Tool). While the project partner monthly meetings are an excellent forum for reviewing and planning activities, the lead M&E organization is not present to discuss M&E plans and to involve research staff in them.

Communication has been given an unusually high profile in this project, to good effect. Information sharing is facilitated by mechanisms such as wiki and Yammer, especially for those with good internet connectivity, and all the fundamentals are in place for good communications support to scaling as that component takes off.

Project management structures are adequate to oversee and advise the project, although specific funds could be assigned for Program coordination (especially for activities such as the development of SI indicators and inter-project exchange visits). Otherwise the budget is adequate, although re-financing could be speeded up so that researchers can operate more effectively.

It was unreasonable to expect a participatory, systems research project to understand the context in depth, to establish research sites and identify demand, to develop appropriate innovations and to bring these to scale in five years. It is expected that by the end of the five year phase, the project will have completed two full years of on-site experimentation. Further years will be needed to consolidate the single discipline research and to integrate that knowledge into activities that provide real improvements in system efficiencies (of water, land, labor, nutrients, cash) at the household, community and landscape scales that meet the different needs of each type of farmer in this highly heterogeneous environment.

A second five-year phase is therefore recommended by the review team to build on the good work started in Phase I and to influence and document the scaling processes and structures that result (hopefully with complementary support from USAID bilateral development funding).

**Recommendations**

Some 60 recommendations have been made to the project coordination team against the evaluation questions provided to the Review Team. The Review Team has selected ten of these as being those most critical for the project at the present time, as follows:

* Develop a theory of change- or outcomes-based rolling project framework with time-bound milestones and SMART indicators (including sustainable intensification indicators)
* Develop an exit strategy (set of actions to complete Phase I) as a contingency against the project closing in 2016. This would include a synthesis of the tangible outcomes expected from Outputs 1 and 2 and how to attain them during Phase I, and a road map for Output 3.
* Make more use of landscape/watershed level parameters in the system, for example nutrient, water and GHG budgets, to guide thinking and action on sustainable intensification.
* Develop the draft scaling plan further to include outcomes, milestones and indicators of success, and share it with all partners so that AR’s role in scaling is clearly understood
* Start mapping (social and spatial) and quantification of adoption (formal and informal, planned and unplanned) as soon as possible so as not to lose information on the start of these processes
* Make further improvement on the integration of different disciplinary components in the research process. The wide range of disciplinary backgrounds should make better use of the opportunity provided at the sites to investigate the interaction, be it complementary or competitive, among the different components (crops-livestock-natural resource) of the farming system
* Improve the uptake of the PMMT for project monitoring and evaluation so that it is able to provide accountability to the donor, guide project management and assist learning as envisaged. The plan should enable the current flexible and adaptive approach to be maintained while providing a framework for tracking overall project progress against expected outcomes
* Provide an in-country M&E presence to engage with partners at the monthly meetings, to mainstream the monitoring of project progress and to lead the development of project indicators
* Expedite the elucidation of sustainable intensification indicators for the benefit of the project, the AR Program and other SI programs
* Develop a second phase in order to consolidate the work of Phase 1 and further develop and demonstrate the application of practical approaches to sustainable intensification at the household and landscape scales.